

Last week I had several wonderful conversations about volunteers in our community.

I chatted with an artist visiting our town. He was a veteran of many plein air competitions and spoke appreciatively of how well organized our event was, particularly being its first year. He also spoke about the Evansville residents he had met while here, and he remembered several by name. He reflected on how inviting and friendly we had been, and he compared us quite favorably to other communities he'd visited.

He asked me, "In your position, when you attend national conferences, what do you tell people about Evansville? What makes Evansville stand out?" Well, I've never attended a national conference, and when I attend something on a state-wide basis, people tend to be a bit familiar with Evansville. But to tell them one thing that stands out about Evansville: I don't tell them about being the soybean capitol of the state, I don't tell them about our historic district, and I don't tell them about being located between Madison and Janesville.

The one thing that most stands out is Evansville's strong culture of volunteerism. Whether it's a large production or small, whether an ongoing activity or a single event, whether organized or spontaneous – Evansville has great wealth in its volunteers who give so freely of their time, skills, and knowledge. It is about compassion for our community.

Later, when running weekend errands, I met a volunteer who actively supports many organizations and activities throughout the year. This time he was wearing his Friends of the Library hat and selling raffle tickets to support the organization in conjunction with its upcoming annual Ice Cream Social. And, yes, much of our organizations and events rely dearly on fundraising. We talked briefly about the volunteers for the Friends and also about the volunteers who coach Little League baseball. Other activities could certainly have come up, but these were the ones we discussed that morning, two family-friendly activities which add to our community.

With the Little League program, we had been short five coaches for twenty-four teams. With phone calls and generous support, we were able to get the spots filled (and most of the teams even have assistant coaches). But it really brought home the importance and necessity of volunteers. Without their dedication, so many of the activities which enrich our community simply could not happen. Evansville is blessed to have so many volunteers with so many talents so enthusiastic to give.

The third conversation: I was at Lake Leota Park, and on my way out I saw several cars parked at the Baker Office Building. I guessed (correctly) that it was a board meeting of the Evansville Community Partnership (ECP). I popped in to say hi, had the pleasure of thanking two new board members, and stayed on through the remainder of their meeting.

Obviously on the agenda, the Fourth of July is ECP and Evansville's premier event. The planning begins months in advance, and now the five-day party is almost here. Two nights of fireworks, live music every night, parade on the morning of the Fourth, and all

the other games, activities, and refreshments. See the ECP website www.evansville-wi.net for details. It takes a tremendous amount of dedication from around 200 individuals (many wearing several hats or working multiple shifts). And that's just to run the basic event! The number balloons when you add in all the volunteers for the FFA Alumni, Youth Center, ecumenical church service, Lions, and other organizations.

Another agenda item was mention of a time bank being organized (by volunteers, of course) and well under way to going public. As explained to me, the time bank works like this: for every hour of service you give a time bank member, you earn one time bank hour, which you can then trade for services offered by other members. As charitable acts traded informally among members, time bank hours have no monetary value. An hour of baking cookies, stuffing envelopes, or house painting is of equal value. What a way to grow community spirit and be even better neighbors!

In closing, a very sincere and heartfelt thank you to all of our volunteers throughout the Evansville community.